

The Moral Imagination in Brazil

By [Marie Mainil](#)

When the United Nations asked if I was interested in [serving in Burundi](#) this year, my reaction was one of mixed feelings. Having studied the institution in school and interned there, I know its problems (or at least some of them). Yet I can hardly imagine a world without the UN: first, because it's there, and second, because without it, the world might be even less secure. Plus, I have always wanted to get to know Africa from the ground. As I write this, I find myself somewhere in the air, between Brussels and Bujumbura, and I find myself thinking about Dandalunda, a place where the river meets the sea.

Last summer, I spent time in Brazil, mostly in the province of Bahia. A good friend and colleague, Wes, lives there and had been waiting for me to visit and experience the magic of the place. Magic it was, judging by the note I sent him on my return to the United States:

I feel I got cured of a lot of anxieties in Bahia. I feel much more at peace. And I understand so much more about the creativity part of the [conflict] transformation process. The creativity itself and its environment. Its thoughtfulness and its playfulness. Its openness. Its nourishing environment. Its synthesis environment, like the wall painting at the Esperanca project¹ with an unintentional bullet hole in the middle. An environment that doesn't lend itself to (be) overwork(ed), yet which provides intensity of experience, synthesis of complexity.



The author at the Esperanca Project

By far, Bahia was my best “field experience” so far. John Paul Lederach’s *The Moral Imagination* (Oxford, 2005) is, by far, the best book on conflict transformation I have read. I put these two in conversation. It’s a way for me to prepare for what’s awaiting me in Bujumbura, and to share insights and reflections that will be of interest, I think, to Mantle readers.

Sketches from Salvador

Wes and his student Daniel picked us up at the Salvador Airport, and we headed to Praia du Forte, his village. Praia used to be a fisherman village. With the agreement of the local population, Petrobras, the Brazilian oil company, has helped transform Praia into a small eco-resort with an environmental reserve (home to sea turtles and whales) and schools that feature environmental studies. Locals still live here, and clearly they have prospered. Meanwhile, Petrobras drills offshore nearby.

At night, we go to Salvador’s historic center and enjoy music and Brazilian food. What a treat.

We talk cultural exchange. Cultural exchange without authenticity is no cultural exchange. How do we navigate cultural exchange to open the possibility for authentic dialogue? You use the frames of reference that you have.

In the town of Salvador, where the music (did I mention the Michael Jackson drums?!) never stops, where it travels, from corner to street, from street to corner, under different forms and lights, never leaving you as you walk through the *ciudad*.

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We have more amazing food at a culinary school where the waitresses are dressed in local garb.² There might be a discomfort in this sort of re-enactment of the colonial experience. We think authenticity. Salvador is a place to think fairness, and fairness in relationship to authenticity.

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We spend the weekend in Salvador, enjoying the arts, the cats, and history (the Portuguese royals, the ghosts, the slave revolution) it has to offer. Brazilians are tired of being seen by gringos as exotic natives. They are people too. I am tired of being targeted as a tourist. I am a person too. Talk about the need for proper cultural exchange. Authentic politics, what does that mean?



Street art in Salvador (author photo)

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Wes introduces me to a philosopher friend of his who lives in the Museum of the Imaginary Object in Salvador. Jorge, the man in question, is quite something. Not only is he a former soccer player-turned-philosopher who lives in a museum, but he engages his community in a way that elevates him to the status of wise man.

First, there are the colored cows all around, in the books and as carnival costumes, which he created to undo the children's myth of the bad, *black cow*.³

Second, Jorge facilitates kids mixing the music of reggae, hip-hop, beats from Salvador, and more. The result is a profound conversation of lived experiences, past and present. Jorge says this creation process helps them return to oneness, which beyond providing an experience in authenticity, is a matter of life and death in a city where deadly violence is still very much present. Mediation, happiness, confidence, crying, shouting, safe space all happen in the process and render the kids more grounded, more connected, and thereby helps prevent violence. This is how conflicts are transformed and prevented.

Reach out to those you fear

Touch the art of complexity

Imagine beyond what is seen

Risk vulnerability one step at a time.⁴

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Jorge and I come to talk about sustainability, about a redefinition of profit I see all around him. Profit is not only the price tag of the product; rather it is the prize of the product which certainly includes the human and material damages *prevented* by his community efforts. We also eat sustainably—and colorfully. I wonder how we can decolonize the mind—the mind which funds but also takes more, consciously or not, the technical mind that forgets to be fully, creatively human. Take Petrobras for example: Jorge introduces me to his concept of the dialectic of patience. If there is to be a future, with good intentions and/or out of necessity, the funds will come his way, he says.

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Jorge's bucket list includes:

- The creation of a university of authenticity, home of pluri-ethnic education, integrity, sustainability, capoeira angola⁵ as green education, and natural foods. He has already obtained non-profit status from the Brazilian government for this endeavor—which, any Brazilian will tell you, is quite an accomplishment.

- Seeing the colonizers reconstruct their identities from superior to equal, and the colonized reconstruct their identities from inferior to equal. Jorge sees the reconstruction of these relations not as affirmative action, but as integrity in relationship and environment. Diversity laws passed by former president Lula da Silva's administration have been helpful, he says, in this regard. Law 10.639/03 makes the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture compulsory in every school in the country. This was followed by Law 11.645/08, which also includes the Indian question in school curriculum. In 2004, within the Ministry of Education (M.E.C.), a specific department was set up, the Department of Continuing Education, Teaching of Reading and Writing and Diversity (Secad), with the idea, among other issues, of including the theme of diversity in educational policies.

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“Jorge, is there any question I haven’t asked you want to answer?”

“All that hasn’t been said is already here in a vibration, in the liminal space.”

And may be a bit also in the soccer fever outside—coming inside.

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Sketches from SãoPaulo

Hello SãoPaulo, I came to visit your Institut Braudel.⁶

Since 2000, the Institut Braudel has gained intimate knowledge of the workings of schools in poor, often violent communities by developing Reading Circles, a new teaching model by which they train student leaders to read and discuss the classics of world literature, from Homer and Plato to Shakespeare and Mark Twain.

I am invited to sit inside the reading circle. No one likes to be observed from the outside. I observe great teachers who know the classics reading alongside the kids. They are great, caring facilitators. When I arrive, a youth is discussing women’s issues. Their creativity is palpable in this beautiful décor, capturing their flying words: Picasso... Dostoevsky... Prison... Liberty... Proust... Da Vinci... Depth... Van Gogh... Nietzsche... Sexuality... Freud... Nostalgia... Happiness... Frustration... Romance... Chagall... Compassion... Passion... Conscience... Separation... Shakespeare... feelings and their interpretations... the Wizard of Oz... Symbolism... The kids feel all this, you can see it through their body language.

I wonder, kids, “How do you relate to foreign authors?”

The answer is quick and unanimous: Humanity. “Artists have a special gift to access humanity. By studying them we can understand ourselves better.”

“Yes, and this is why although we live in the city we are able to talk about the role of nature and its relationship to our oneness.”

And then: “Is your article going to help kids in the U.S. do what we do?”

Little man, “I surely hope so.”

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They move on to talk about refugees, and I wonder if they sometimes feel like they obtain refugee status in the text. Yes they say; it is a place where they can go to get knowledge, natural

refuge, and energy, but warn that it is no picnic. There is an ambiance of open fragility, high level focus, endurance (this particular circle goes on all day), and maturity.

The kids are also facilitators in their areas. They run reading circles in their diverse schools. If they stand out, they receive internship money. It's training; it's work. Most kids work here in Brazil. Talking to their friends about this activity of theirs is not easy, but their involvement with reading circles is "well worth it, given the communication and human skills we get."

And the next reader goes, organically and not according to plans. Oh the joy and competence on their faces! Generosity, perseverance, possibilities—the three words that come to mind when I think of the Braudel Institute's kids. They speak the truth on the conscious situations of life, like what they said about *Alice in Wonderland*: "In imagination and through the process of apprenticeship, you keep going even if sometimes you don't know what happens. You'll find yourself in strange situations, but they will serve some day."

And perhaps even more quotable: "Continue to live—happiness is possible."

"Persevere—happiness is possible through moments of happiness."

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"The art of serendipity in social change requires peripheral vision, not just forward looking eyesight."⁷

How, when, and why did politics and developing responses to social change come to be seen as something separate from the whole human experience?

Sketches from Rio

Rio's architecture: thoughtful and playful.

There is at least one other thing in Rio that is thoughtful and playful: Viva Rio.⁸

Viva Rio's Viva Favela project⁹ shows us favelas from insiders' points of view. The project is youth-led, and the quality of the content is so good that it has become the go-to source for favela-related information. Such quality is a testimony to both the talented youth and to the services Viva Rio offers them: professional video courses, online classes, material, sponsorship, and partnerships with universities. Graduates of the Viva Favela project have gone to careers in newspapers and television. Through virtual meeting rooms and debates, Viva Favela's contributors are also working on a magazine about culture and memory.

"To live between memory and potentiality is to live permanently in a creative space, pregnant with the unexpected."¹⁰

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From an interview with youth Paulo Campello, visual editor at Viva Favela

Paulo is from the Santa Mar Community which is, in his words, one of the scariest favelas in the last decade:

“It’s not as bad now but there is still drug trafficking and its consequences around. [These are] the mixed results of the pacification you read about in the papers...

"Viva Favela is important to show my community’s intellectual production.

"I don’t select subjects, I don’t think about good or bad when choosing topics, I get the emotions out of the facts. As editor I select what needs to be approached.

"In terms of my community’s relationship to the outside world, it’s important that the ‘high class’ has access to the favela culture, the black culture, and their creativity. It’s important for my community to own our image so that we can have a place in society, so that we can turn around the information about favelas that is still too often exclusively stigmatized.

"It’s important for me and my peers to have a platform for our citizen journalism. Our work is important outside but also inside. My people should be proud of who they are. Drug traffickers represent less than one percent of our community.”

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A snapshot of the Rocinha favela outside Rio de Janeiro, the largest favela in Brazil (Wikicommons).

Next stop with Viva Rio was the Esperanca Project,¹¹ located in the favelas. Many taxis declined to take us there. For the record, I did not feel unsafe; instead I was impressed by the community center that offered everything from karate to dance. It felt like a comfortable nest of after school programs.

Viva Rio focuses on Brazil, but its work has been so effective that their help has been solicited by international organizations and other foreign countries. Notably, the United Nations asked Viva Rio to help reduce gang violence in Haiti. A quick look online at Viva Rio's activities in Haiti¹² speaks tons about their creativity.

A few months after this particular request, the UN also asked Brazil to send peacekeepers to Haiti.

Although Haitians and Brazilians speak different languages, they also have many similarities that have been crucial in the successes of Brazilians in Haiti, such as their Afro-American ethnicity and religious and musical traditions. When the UN wasn't able to get into violent neighborhoods in 2005, Viva Rio organized a Voodoo ceremony asking permission to go in. Viva Rio integrated the military in the activities, and the result was an opening for the possibility of dialogue and trust among all parties involved.

Haitians asked Viva Rio to remain after the tragic earthquake of 2010. In the wake of the earthquake, 200,000 moved to the Viva Rio community center; they stayed there for three months. Eventually and in order to resume activities, Viva Rio decided to negotiate with the families who had taken refuge with them. The results were surprising. Providing that every family would be provided with minimum shelter, three months of food supplies, one scholarship per family for one year, follow-up care for new-born babies until age two and their mothers, and help to take rubble out of their homes, families agreed to move out of the facilities. A week later, eighty percent of the Viva Rio refugees were back in their homes or with their families, three percent were in another camp, and two percent were in the streets.

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In view of Viva Rio's success, I wondered about Viva Rio's staff experience in Haiti. Here is Executive Director, Rubem César Fernandes:

"It's mediation work; it's bringing together resources from the outside and from the inside. For example, the distribution of food through local leaders, or the organization of cultural life manifestations such as popular street bands, which are connected politically and to more or less violent criminals. Through these activities, Viva Rio helped the UN enter closed, violent neighborhoods. More specifically, Viva Rio gained access by helping local bases get organized for carnival by sponsoring costumes and bands' registration they could not afford. In exchange, Viva Rio got access to work on water, gender equality, and health projects. Viva Rio even ended up facilitating a peace accord between local bases to reduce violence. The peace accord is four years old and still going strong. [Smile]

Our giving out prizes for the absence of violent deaths has been very effective. An area that goes on without violent deaths for a certain amount of time receives scholarships and a BIG street celebration where rival groups play music together all night long. For longer periods of peace, community leaders can also receive a motorcycle."

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Viva Rio activities also include soccer (Brazilians are also helping building Haitian national teams), capoeira, dance, and orchestras.

"For the moral imagination to emerge and transcend, it depends on and must incite the fullest of all possible sensuous imaginations."¹³

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And on Viva Rio's lesson of how to run sustainable help?

“Proven experience, creativity, mediation rather than imposition role, dialogue skills, creativity in dialogue, and in the Haitian case at least, a strong cultural element of communication and celebration.

“We are invited to several places (Liberia, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Mozambique, Jamaica, and Angola) for both the kind of work we just talked about and also for our experience with garbage processing, which we work on in Haiti as well. We are happy to consult, but in terms of deep involvement, it takes time. A lifetime. Somehow we became Haitian for the rest of our lives, and we need to remember that when deciding where and how we might be able to help when asked.

“Connect intuition, observation, and experience. Internal standard, honesty, simplicity, heart as much as head, and fun.”

Thoughtful and playful, I told you so.

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Reflection

The discussions of the kind featured above are not prevalent in much of the technical, skill-based, and process-oriented writing common in the field of peacebuilding.

Yet I have found that transformative moments in conflict are many times those filled with haiku-like quality that floods a particular process or space. We might call them the moments of the aesthetic imagination, a place where suddenly, out of complexity and historic difficulty, the clarity of great insight makes an unexpected appearance in the form of an image in a way of putting something that can only be described as artistic.

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Remember the quotable Braudel kids. Remember Jorge's musicians.

The challenge for invoking the moral imagination as a peacebuilder is not found in perfecting or applying the techniques or the skills of a process. My feeling, is that we have overemphasized the technical aspects and political content to the detriment of the art of giving birth to and keeping a process creatively alive.

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Remember the smiles of Viva Rio.

As aesthetics, the moral imagination seeks to connect with the deep intuition that creates the capacity to penetrate and transcend the challenges of violent conflict. Recognizing

and nurturing this capacity is the ingredient that forges and sustains authentic constructive change.

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Remember, just remember.

“The key to complexity is finding the elegant beauty of simplicity.”¹⁴

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frontispiece: A snapshot of the Rocinha favela outside Rio de Janeiro, the largest favela in Brazil (Wikicommons).

1. <http://criancaesperanca.globo.com/platb/ecerj/>

2. The dress, like so much else in Salvador, has its origins in Africa and in slavery—costumes similar to this were worn by slave women. It consists of a colorful turban-style headdress, a full dress with starched skirts, a shawl and plenty of jewelry. All over the older part of Salvador, and especially in Pelorinho, one sees women dressed in this traditional style. Some of these women work in the tourist-aimed shops (e.g., crafts) and wear the dress to attract customers, while others pose on street corners and hope to earn money by being photographed. In this way, they represent the cultural impact that bringing slaves from Africa has left on Bahia and Brazil.

3. In Brazilian children stories, the black cow is traditionally the bad character.

4. Jean-Paul Lederach. *The Moral Imagination* (Oxford, 2005).

5. Capoeira, the dancing, kicking, spinning and wildly athletic martial art practiced all over Brazil, but more prevalently in Salvador, is thought to have been brought by slaves from Angola. Capoeira, whose acrobatics executed in tandem with others require a great sense of one's place in the space one finds him/herself in was a mean of expressive defense for those slave.

6. <http://www.circulosdeleitura.org.br/>

7. Lederach.

8. <http://www.vivario.org.br/publique/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?tpl=home>

9. <http://www.vivafavela.com.br/>

10. Lederach.

11. <http://criancaesperanca.globo.com/platb/ecerj/>

12. On the web [here](#).

13. Lederach.

14. All quotes in the Reflections section are from Lederach.